

How to Avoid Falling into Traps When Discussing Urban China: Four Strategies

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A couple of years ago I was invited to an upcoming conference in China about the twentieth-century Chinese revolution and its historical legacies. I had been assigned to a panel titled “The Chinese Revolution and the Countryside” (中国革命与乡村). The next panel on the agenda was “The Chinese Revolution and Urban Transformation” (中国革命与城市改造). My kneejerk reaction to the conference program was to get defensive about anti-rural bias. I wondered why the word “transformation” (改造) described cities but not villages. Did the revolution transform cities more than villages? Or is there so much to talk about when it comes to cities that the topic of inquiry needs to be narrowed down to the more manageable idea of “urban transformation,” while the countryside is so simple that it does not require any subcategories?

I then found myself pondering a bigger question: what I had done wrong to get assigned to the rural panel? I did not feel the same way when I was invited to a workshop about “Studying China’s Urban Condition” at the Australian Centre on China in the World in January 2014. I research the relationship between city and countryside. I’m equally happy talking about cities or villages, and happiest of all speaking about how the two realms intersect and interact. So why did it seem fine and natural to take part in an Australian workshop about urban China, but marginalizing to be stuck on the lone rural panel at a Chinese conference about the history of the revolution?

I ended up deciding that I was overthinking the panel categories. I reminded myself that the rural part of China’s revolution was not being wholly disrespected or disregarded—the rural panel is listed before the urban one on the schedule, after all, and at least it had not been omitted entirely.

And maybe it was better that the countryside lacked a qualifier like “transformation,” leaving more latitude for speakers to choose their own focus. In any case, it would be better to have a discussion at the conference itself than to second-guess the organizers beforehand. I mention my gut reactions to the panel titles, however, because it reflects my broader discomfort about how inequalities in Chinese society can be reflected in the categories that scholars—inside and outside of China—use to describe that society. After introducing contemporary China’s rural-urban divide, I discuss four strategies that scholars discussing urban and rural issues can use to guard against allowing existing inequities to skew the questions they ask.

As imperfect as such words as rural and urban are, it is impossible to dispense with the categories entirely. Better to use the words but to do so carefully and to avoid unconsciously bolstering harmful hierarchies and marginalizations, like the fact that a Chinese child born in the rural hinterland starts her life at an immediate disadvantage compared with her urban peers in terms of education, health care, and job opportunities. Contemporary rural-urban inequality can be traced back to the Mao Zedong era (1949-1976), when rural China was marginalized and stuck at the bottom of a system in which economic and political power was concentrated in cities. A hierarchy that privileged cities and marginalized villages became especially clear during the Great Leap Famine of the early 1960s, when top officials based in cities allowed villagers to starve while ensuring the grain supplies of urban areas. It was also in evidence during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when urban officials protected the political “purity” of cities by deporting hundreds of thousands of purported class enemies to the countryside. The situation changed dramatically beginning in the 1980s, when decollectivization and relaxed restrictions on migration led millions of rural people to leave villages in search of better opportunities, but their marginalization in Chinese society continues to this day.

How can scholars avoid allowing this marginalization to shape their inquiries? Strategy

number one: avoid one-track thinking. It is inadvisable—even impossible—to discuss urban China without referring to rural China. Nor can villages be discussed in a vacuum. In order to understand either sphere, scholars must talk about both. This is not only because comparisons between different realms help to illuminate specific ideologies and experiences, but also because Chinese cities are full of rural migrants and because urban cultures, products, and people deeply affect rural life. During the Mao era, villagers and urbanites interacted in many ways, from urban work teams sent to villages to the millions of urban youth who settled in the countryside as part of the sent-down youth program. Nowadays, many city teenagers have never set foot in a village (and they have no plans to do so), but they see villagers every day on their way to school or work—sweeping streets, collecting plastic bottles, or selling vegetables. Villagers see urban culture every day, through the stories of returned migrant workers and also through the images on their television screens. Not only are the terms “urban” and “rural” defined in opposition to one another, but the two realms constantly overlap and interact.

Strategy number two: take a trip outside of Beijing or Shanghai. In other words, avoid using China’s largest and most prominent cities as stand-ins for “urban China.” Too often scholars focus exclusively on Beijing or Shanghai, while ignoring Handan, Lanzhou, Zhuzhou, and Zibo. Looking at less prominent cities, however, drives home the point that there is no single Chinese urban. There is tremendous diversity between different Chinese cities, and there are also major disparities within cities. Comparing John Osburg’s book about rich businesspeople in Chengdu with Mun Young Cho’s ethnography of a peripheral shantytown in Harbin, as Luigi Tomba does in a perceptive review essay, reveals striking insights about the costs and opportunities of China’s economic transformation outside of wealthy coastal areas.¹ Beijing and Shanghai are indeed

¹ Luigi Tomba, “The Moral Worlds of Wealth and Poverty: Review Essay,” *China Journal* 72 (July 2014): 139-145; Mun Young Cho, *The Specter of “The People”: Urban Poverty in Northeast China* (Ithaca,

disproportionately important; they deserve to be studied because they are China's most significant political and economic hubs. But many scholars, myself included, write about them disproportionately not because of their innate importance, but because sources and creature comforts are more easily available on the Bund. As Cho and Osburg discovered in their studies of Harbin and Chengdu, doing fieldwork off the beaten path entails constant headaches and hangovers, but can yield valuable results.

Strategy number three: learn from confusing category-busters. "In-between spaces," meaning sites that are difficult to clearly identify as either rural or urban, are more common than scholars often realize. These category-busters include mines, industrial and research compounds in the hinterland, high-rise apartments built on reclaimed village land, or even a high-speed train full of city dwellers speeding through the countryside (if the train were to crash in the countryside, then it would definitely be in-between). Such puzzling examples are not exclusively rural or urban, but their in-between status is useful in identifying the assumptions behind such words as "urban" and "rural." Consider the example of the Tianjin Ironworks, an industrial enclave ceded from the mountainous corner of Hebei province to provide raw material to the city of Tianjin in 1969. Administratively part of urban Tianjin, the ironworks site is directly next to a village called Gengle. During the Mao years, Tianjin youth coveted an assignment to the ironworks because they could keep their urban household registration, something that youth "sent down" to rural communes closer to Tianjin could not do. A piece of paper with the word "non-agricultural" on it (an urban household registration) overrode the difficulties posed by the ironworks' remote, isolated setting in the countryside. More recently, ironworks retirees have settled in gated high-rise communities provided by the company—in Tianjin proper, not at the ironworks site. They want to live out their golden

NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); John Osburg, *Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality Among China's New Rich* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

years in what feels like a city setting, even though the ironworks itself is “urban” on paper.

Strategy number four: be aware of why certain phenomena are easily visible. Wonder about what’s being kept hidden. In 2014 Perry Link took exception to Orville Schell’s claim about “China’s new confidence in its own system of Leninist capitalism.” Link called on Schell to be more specific about what he meant by “China.” “Schell is describing primarily the mentality of an elite—urban, wealthy, and ready to identify with the state,” Link wrote. “But that his hardly everyone.” To drive home his point, Link questioned whether a violent police crackdown against ten thousand people protesting land expropriation in the Guizhou town of Sansui in October 2014 represented “confidence in a system of Leninist capitalism.”² Wealth and confidence are easy to see in China these days on the streets of Beijing and Shanghai. That is where top officials and propagandists want observers, Chinese and foreign, to focus on. Violent tensions and conflicts like the protests in Sansui are less visible, but are impossible to keep hidden, in spite of the efforts of censors to block the news.³ During the Mao years it was easier to stop visitors from seeing anything outside of China’s showcase cities: in the 1960s, foreigners living in Beijing were prohibited from traveling beyond a twenty-kilometer radius of the city.⁴

So one defining feature of the Chinese urban, when compared with rural areas, is that it is more visible. Ordinary citizens and scholars alike can more easily see, record, and transmit news about events to other places. It is more difficult to cover things up in major cities. This is one reason the massacre of hundreds of civilians in Beijing in June 1989 by the People’s Liberation Army

² Perry Link, reply by Orville Schell, “China Strikes Back’: An Exchange,” *New York Review of Books*, November 20, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/nov/20/china-strikes-back-exchange>.

³ The terms “Sansui + armed police,” “Sansui + police,” and “Sansui + march” were blocked on Weibo as of October 15. “Sensitive: Guo Yushan Picks Quarrels, HK, More,” *China Digital Times*, October 15, 2014, <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/2014/10/sensitive-guo-yushan-picks-quarrels-hk/>.

⁴ Annie Le Cage, *Turbulence in a Clear Sky: Beijing at the Dawn of the Cultural Revolution*, trans. Anne Ferrato (Paris: Lacurne, 2014).

has sparked far more discussion and scholarship than the army's killing of 1,600 villagers in Yunnan in 1975, even though the latter event lasted longer and involved airplanes, artillery, and grenades.⁵ One of the most important—and difficult—tasks facing scholars writing about China, whether we focus on the Mao years or on what came after, is to figure out what has been concealed and striving to uncover it, rather than accepting easily visible phenomena (“confidence,” “stability,” “urban transformation”) as straightforward reflections of reality.

⁵ Xian Wang, “Islamic Religiosity, Revolution, and State Violence in Southwest China: The 1975 Shadian Massacre,” master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, 2013.